

## CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

Interview with **ROMAINE THOMAS**Conducted by **BETTY KING**

Romaine Thomas had a distinguished career in the DC Public School System, including a long tenure as Principal of Ketchum Elementary School. She and her husband Harry, who later became the Ward 5 City Councilman, were active in political and civic affairs in their ward. In 1978, she coordinated Barry's campaign in Ward 5, as she did for all his campaigns.

October 16, 2015

**BETTY KING:** My name is Betty King. It is October 16, 2015, and I am talking with Romaine Thomas. Thank you for agreeing to be part of this oral history project, Romaine. We really appreciate it. You were such an important friend and supporter of Marion Barry.

Tell me, when did you come to the District of Columbia?

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** Okay. As you said, I am Romaine Bell Thomas. I was born in the district, and I was born in the section of the city in what is Ward 5, right over off of Montello Avenue, where I was born. The house is still there. And I always like to say this—I was born at home and the doctor that delivered me was Dr. Smith, who was a prominent doctor in that particular area. At that time that area was quite rural, and if you think of it and look at it today, you would not believe that they did not have all of the apartment housing. But it was just almost a very, very woodsy place, and I was born there. That's where I was born, on Capitol Avenue, and amazingly enough, I am still in Ward 5. I have moved over into the Brooklyn area but I still reside in Ward 5.

**BETTY KING:** And have all your life?

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** Yes, I have, all of my life.

**BETTY KING:** That's great. Tell me, you went to school in the district, did you?

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** I did go to school in the district. At that time I was going to a school called Crummell School that was named after Mr. Crummell, who was an abolitionist and he was also a civil rights fighter, in terms of living in the district and working with the city, and working with the churches that were there at that particular time. But I went to Crummell Elementary School, and, of course, that was a school that was fashioned after the Quincy Grammar School. I like to think of that and I like to say that to you because it comes from Boston. We had grades Kindergarten-6, and it was a school that involved children and the parents and the staff, and many activities, community activities. At that time, we did activities such as wrapping the maypole at May time. We'd go back to that. It probably would be good if they did it at this particular time.

But amazingly enough, I did attend Crummell School, and in my career I came back. I went to D.C. Teachers College growing up, and I was [employed] in two other schools in the city—Parkview Elementary, that was the first school, and then I came out to have my children, to have Debbie and Harry, and when I returned back, believe it or not, I went to Crummell to teach, the school that I had attended.

**BETTY KING:** Where you had been in elementary school.

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** I did, uh-huh. And, of course, I attended school at Crummell and then we decided that we needed additional space, and the school was built on Mt. Olivet Road called Webb School, and that school is still there now, today, but, of course, it's a charter school. I was the person who walked half of the student body from Ketcham up to Webb. I was the leader, and I went to Webb to teach at that point. Later on, I went out to have Harry, as I was saying, and I came back to school that was off of 13th Street, and from there I ended up going into a laboratory school. At that time, we had a lab school that was the school for training teachers, and the teachers would come from the D.C. Teachers College for class, in terms of training, to become teachers. But you had to be selected to go there. You couldn't just go. And I had been selected as one of the training teachers at LaSalle Elementary School, and from there I went into administration. I went through the assistant principal into the principalship, and I ended up as the principal in Anacostia, at Ketcham Elementary School.

**BETTY KING:** That's where you were when—

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** All of that time. But I loved the city and my husband, who was Harry L. Thomas, of course, he was dedicated to working with civic associations and working with people in terms of trying to inspire people and to help them to be promoted. And he was an excellent person.

**BETTY KING:** He was, indeed. He was fabulous. You both were.

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** Oh, thank you. Thank you for that. At that time, of course, Harry worked at the Interior Department, and we were very involved in some of the programs that were produced by the Interior Department, especially the National Park Service, and he was dedicated to that, so we were very proud and pleased about that too.

**BETTY KING:** When did you and Harry meet Marion Barry?

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** I knew Marion through the SNCC [Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee] days, through the days when he was in the city, and when he was really beginning to try to wake the city up in terms of civil rights and in terms of their plight and in terms of what we needed to do, as a minority group, blacks within the city, and he was that kind of leader. I admired him and I said, "This young man, he is really very, very serious about this. It's not just a young man who is just out there making noise, but he is serious and he stands up and he's not afraid." So, that was when I first met him. I met him through that, and by going to some of the

rallies on U Street, because of interest and concern, I began to really get to know him. As I think of it, that was my real first involvement and impression.

So, of course, when he started running for office I was there to be part of that, and to participate in campaigns, to participate in the door-knocking and in the walking and in the marching.

**BETTY KING:** Did you support him when he ran for the school board?

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** I definitely did, and, of course, by then, I began to know him much better, and he knew me much better too, so I was one of his disciples and I was very proud of his involvement in education. The school where I was at that time, I was principal, and I do have some photos and some other aspects of speeches from his involvement in the city. And when I asked him to come to Ketcham to be one of the speakers for promotions—because at that time we did promotions for sixth-graders, and believe it or not, at schools where I was principal at that time, I had over 1,000 children. In fact, I had to use buildings in other parts of the city, called "bussing" at that time.

**BETTY KING:** My goodness.

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** And, as I said before, my husband was with the Interior Department. So, I decided at one point, this school auditorium is much too small, and I would like to do our promotion because this is a highlight in the lives of Anacostia and in the lives of many of families.

**BETTY KING:** Of course.

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** And I said we need to do something exciting. So, I asked my husband then. I said, "I know this may not be possible, but I would like to move the graduation in June for our sixth-graders. How about seeing if we can get it to the Frederick Douglass home?" which was just up a couple of blocks, "And we will do it on Cedar Hill?" And, at that time, that wasn't an easy thing to do, but because he was involved with the Interior Department and had connections at [?], Harry had no problem with going to the highest authorities and carrying it to them, to see that we could get permission to do that.

**BETTY KING:** And you did.

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** And we did. And then that not only became as the site for our promotion but it was the site for us to do an extensive study in the lives of the children, about Frederick Douglass, and to give them inspiration. And if you've ever been up on that site, it's such a beautiful place for all over the city, that Cedar Hill. And I said that to say Marion was invited to be our guest speaker. I think it was probably among the first promotions that we had. And the children, the parents, they were so excited. Here's the mayor coming to Anacostia, Marion coming to Anacostia, and this was great for him too. And it wasn't just a political opportunity for him. It was a real opportunity for him to really touch the lives and try to inspire the

downtrodden and the people who needed to hear the kind of education, or have the kind of education that we wanted them to have. So, he was very inspirational in doing that.

And then there was another occasion where he adopted the school, because that was a very popular thing to do for different officials and different organizations to adopt a school. And at that time, he did adopt Ketcham, and the staff did so many wonderful things for the children, had wonderful events. We would go to Rock Creek Park at the end of the year and have a celebration, and they would involve them in all kinds of sports and games, which gave them a sense of pride, and a sense of security for that.

**BETTY KING:** Wonderful.

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** So we were very pleased. And then, at that time we were trying to make a difference in the school in terms of the physical plant and the structure because it was wearing down and it needed renovation and needed a lot of support, in terms of following through, because we were trying to do an addition, and he was part of that. Then we managed to get [First Lady] Hillary Clinton, on a visit to the school with him, and with also our Congresswoman [Eleanor Holmes Norton]. Several of them came, and I have those picture there, with Eleanor Norton, and the whole community and all of the children, they just felt like, "Hey, we're not being neglected. They are giving us some attention," from the top down. So, that was very important for us, in terms of his promoting that.

**BETTY KING:** Great. Tell me, 1978, the campaign for mayor, when nobody thought we could win. There were only those of us on the inside who knew we were going to win because it was so important. But you were coordinating Ward 5, I believe, the getting out the vote and getting people to vote and so forth. Was there a lot of presence of [Marion's 1978 opponents, incumbent Mayor] Walter Washington campaign and the [City Council Chairman] Sterling Tucker campaign in the ward that summer?

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** Say again.

**BETTY KING:** When you were running Marion's campaign in Ward 5, you and Harry, was there a very active Walter Washington campaign, and an active Sterling Tucker campaign in Ward 5, to the same degree that you were active?

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** Oh. Yes, yes, of course. Of course, there were some very loyalists, you know, who were in those campaigns, and they were there to support and to do whatever they could. Because, first of all, it was almost like a theme—are you ready to vote and are you ready to participate in trying to make a difference in the city? So, Marion caught fire with young people, younger people, because he was giving more attention to the younger adults and he was a young man himself, and he was much more interesting in terms of having the kind of inspiration that he could inspire them to come along. So, it was. There was quite a competition going on.

**BETTY KING:** Well, because I've talked to several of the ward coordinators and there were wards where the opposition was not as vigorous as it was. I thought it probably was, because Ward 5 is a very political ward.

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** Absolutely. Absolutely.

**BETTY KING:** You all don't mess around. When an election comes you take sides and you fight.

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** That absolutely was the case. Yeah, Ward 5 is a very active ward, you know, on the politics, but it's a ward in which people really care about what is going on.

**BETTY KING:** Absolutely.

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** And they stopped and they'd listen and they want to be involved, and they want to participate, and they want to make contributions. They want to make sure that they are trying to get behind the right kind of effort that will promote the city and that will promote Ward 5. And at that time, we had such strong activists, people such as Danny Robinson, and people such as Frank Braxton, who just died at the age of 100.

**BETTY KING:** I'm sorry to hear that Frank passed.

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** And we just celebrated his 100th birthday, just last year, and I had no idea that he was going to leave us at this point. But he worked with the unions and he was very involved. People like Florence Pendleton. I don't know what's happened to her but she's not on the scene anymore, but I know she would be quite elderly now.

But anyway, these people worked with passion and from the heart, in terms of being very concerned, in terms of trying to see that those issues that we were fighting for, such as education, the issues. Even at Social Security, all of that was part of what really made folks interested in coming out and being part of actually what was going on.

**BETTY KING:** Well, you and Harry were leaders in that too.

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** Yes. Well, Harry was a person—as you know him, he was a kind person.

**BETTY KING:** Oh, indeed.

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** And he never thought one moment about what can I get out of this, or will something result in my trying to be paid. But he was always willing. He was the contributor. He stepped up to the plate for any purpose, at any time. In fact, he stepped up so much that he should be alive today, because he was fighting the crime all by himself, to the point that the 5th District gave him a police death, because he was always on the scene before they got there.

And that inspired his whole family, my family. Everybody in my family—and I'm talking about the nucleus of the family, the primary aspect of the family—my children grew up knowing

about what it means to get out and to fight and to be concerned about your community and neighborhood, and to try to be concerned about those issues that affect you in life.

**BETTY KING:** Absolutely. Marion used to talk a lot about the least, the lost, and the left-out. Do you remember?

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** Oh, absolutely. And I think that's why he and Harry connected, because they had that same passion, and that same hope, and that same vision that, you know, it can happen, it could make a difference, in terms of what you contribute and how you work together with other folks to make sure that they can have faith, and have hope, and that they can depend on you, that you're dependable. And I think that was one thing that inspired folks about Marion. You could count on him. You could count on his word. What he said, he meant that, and he was going to see that it was going to be a reality, and not only a possibility but a reality.

**BETTY KING:** Absolutely. And Harry was the same, and when Harry retired he became the Ward 5 member of the City Council, right?

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** Yes, he did.

**BETTY KING:** He was a great City Council member.

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** Uh-huh.

**BETTY KING:** Now, so that was the 1978 campaign. Did you and Harry think that we were going to win?

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** Say this again?

**BETTY KING:** Did you and Harry think that we were going to win the mayoral race in 1978? I mean, there was no poll that showed us winning.

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** Absolutely. I think I was going down Florida Avenue, I was in my car, and I saw Marion coming through with his little caravan, and there he was on the bus, standing in the door, waving, and the bus was leaving.

**BETTY KING:** We had the red, double-decker bus. Is that the one you're talking about?

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** Right. Right. And I said, "He's going to win, because he has the winning spirit, and he has the winning attitude. He has to win, and he's going to win." And he did.

**BETTY KING:** So you never doubted that we were going to win.

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** Oh, I didn't. I didn't.

**BETTY KING:** I didn't either, but some people were a little—

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** And Betty, you were so instrumental in being supportive, and being the backup, being the person that translated what people thought they knew into reality, that it could happen, and you were very inspirational throughout all of that whole era.

**BETTY KING:** You're very kind. I'm not sure that I was but I thank you for saying that.

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** Right. Right.

**BETTY KING:** And then you worked on Marion's subsequent campaigns—

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** I did.

**BETTY KING:** —in '82, in '86, and so forth.

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** Right along. Right along. Right along.

**BETTY KING:** You have a quotation that you brought along from Marion's second inaugural address—

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** Yes, I did.

**BETTY KING:** —that you wanted to share.

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** I would like to read that. And this is what I have, a copy of the inaugural speech from the mayor, Marion Barry, Jr., on Monday, January 3, 1983. So, I have this, and this is the quote: "How far you go in life depends on your being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving, and tolerant with both the weak and the strong, because some day, in life, you will have been one or all of these."

**BETTY KING:** That's great.

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** That has more meaning to me than it did in '83, because here I am at that point in life now where I'm with the Commission on Aging, because I'm a senior myself, and that has such strong truth. And this was a philosophical statement by George Washington Carver, so it's principles of life that we need to follow through, and we need not forget, and we need to carry forever.

**BETTY KING:** Which Marion did live by when he was mayor.

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** And that's what's so special.

**BETTY KING:** We know that he had his demons, and he made mistakes and so forth, but he always cared. Always cared.

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** Absolutely. And what people often say is that what he did that may have been considered as being wrong and not the correct thing to do, he did it to himself. He did not do to in terms of hurting other people, in terms of not carrying through a passion.

**BETTY KING:** Yeah. No, he did everything that he could to fulfill his responsibilities as mayor, and then some.

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** Absolutely. Absolutely.

**BETTY KING:** His real commitment to people, and so forth. But as you say, his demons led him to hurt himself but he never did—

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** Absolutely.

**BETTY KING:** And his family, of course.

And now you're the chair of the Commission on Aging.

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** The Commission on Aging.

**BETTY KING:** That's wonderful, Romaine. They are lucky to have you.

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** Well, thank you for saying that. I have some good commissioners there, from each ward, so that's helpful too, when you have that kind of support.

**BETTY KING:** That's great. People have had different impressions as to what it was that the Barry years contributed to the city. People talk about building a black middle class of entrepreneurs and the work that he did with the young people—

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** That is truly paramount about it now.

**BETTY KING:** —through the Youth Leadership Institute and the Summer Jobs Program, and so forth. What do you think is the principal achievement of the Barry years, or more than one achievement?

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** I think the actual thing was that he did make some movement in terms of civil rights and bringing justice. He made an impact on that, as it related to the city. And definitely I think he promoted voting rights, and pushing statehood. He was very proud about that. He was the first one out there that made it become a living monument and effort for people never to forget, and we still are there. We're still moving on some of his inspirations and his support, in terms of trying to bring it to D.C., but that will help the world to understand that we do not have the right and the representation that we need. So, that was one thing too.

And I think he was instrumental in education too, because if you look back through many of the impacts that he had, in terms of the system, in terms of teachers and supporting them and their rights and in their efforts to survive and to teach, that it was a free spirit and it was a freedom that they could enjoy, in terms of working with the schools and working our children. And he had that impact on education too.

And I know there are probably some very specific things that he did that would promote the civil rights, promote the economy, that would promote the principles that we try to live on and inspire our citizens and the city with, in terms of leadership. I think that's an aspect of it too, is the fact that he was—really, sometimes I say he was a born leader. He had such leadership skills innate. It just was automatic, that were there, that inspired him, and helped him to inspire so many others.

**BETTY KING:** Absolutely. You are absolutely correct.

Thank you very much for talking to us, Romaine. It's been wonderful. I appreciate it very much.

**ROMAINE THOMAS:** Thank you so much.